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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MANILA 001275

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [SOCI](#) [PINS](#) [EMIN](#) [RP](#)

SUBJECT: PRESIDENT ARROYO WORKS TO SHORE UP SUPPORT IN  
CATHOLIC CHURCH

REF: A. MANILA 1036

[1](#)B. 05 MANILA 3946

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Classified By: Acting Pol/C Joseph L. Novak for reasons  
1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: In light of recent political turbulence, President Arroyo has been reaching out to high-level members of the Catholic clergy in an effort to shore up support. Arroyo has also taken care not to cross the Church on two key issues: mining and population policy. Arroyo's efforts appear to be bearing fruit: while a handful of bishops oppose her, the vast majority seem reluctant to be drawn into politics, a stance which effectively helps the president. Given its widespread influence (over 80 percent of Filipinos are Catholic), Arroyo will no doubt continue to work hard to maintain good links to the Church. End Summary.

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Reaching out to the Clergy  
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[1](#)2. (C) In light of recent political turbulence, which included the imposition of a State of National Emergency from February 24 - March 3, President Arroyo has been reaching out to high-level members of the Catholic clergy in an effort to shore up support. On March 14, Arroyo met with Ricardo Cardinal Vidal in Cebu and joined in a celebration of Vidal's 50th year as a priest. On March 16, Arroyo traveled to Nueva Vizcaya in northern Luzon to celebrate the birthday of local Bishop Ramon Villena. On March 17, she traveled to Sorsogon in southern Luzon to attend a celebration to mark the 50th anniversary of a priest who had formerly served as the chaplain at Malacanang.

[1](#)3. (C) The president has also had additional meetings with key figures in the Church. Monsignor Hernando Coronel, an assistant to Gaudencio Cardinal Rosales of Manila, told Acting Pol/C on March 20 that she had held a private meeting with Rosales in early March. During the meeting, Arroyo had offered to fly to Rome with Rosales and his party in order to attend Rosales' formal induction as a cardinal. Rosales had demurred, while expressing his appreciation to the president for the offer. Coronel commented that Rosales -- who meant no disrespect to the president -- did not want his "red hat" ceremonies in Rome to be linked in any way to politics back home.

14. (C) When asked about all of these contacts, Malacanang Political Adviser Gabby Claudio told Acting Pol/C that the president was aware that the State of National Emergency had been controversial. She had decided "to intensify" efforts to reach out to key sectors, including the Church, in order to explain her views and communicate her willingness to listen. Arroyo, Claudio asserted, was not doing this "out of weakness" -- in fact, she felt her positioning with the Church as a whole was quite solid (see below). She also planned to meet with other sectors, such as the business community and groups from outside of Manila, down the line in order to solidify her position further.

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Mining, Population Policy  
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15. (C) Claudio added that President Arroyo had also taken care not to cross the Church on two key issues: mining and population policy. Regarding the first matter, President Arroyo, House Speaker Jose de Venecia and some other GRP officials had met with a handful of bishops representing the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) on March 10 to discuss the Mining Act of 1995. (Note: After years of complex litigation by environmental activists, the Mining Act was ruled to be legal by the Supreme Court in 2004. End Note.) The bishops, Claudio continued, had expressed their long-standing view that the government needed to monitor implementation of the Mining Act more closely and not hesitate to withdraw mining permits where abuses related to the environment were occurring. Arroyo and de Venecia had carefully listened to the bishops and promised to continue to consult with them. Press Secretary Ignacio Bunye announced on March 11 that the president was "sensitive to concerns about mining" and had ordered her administration to enforce environmental standards strictly. Claudio noted to Acting

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Pol/C that President Arroyo had no intention of placing a moratorium on the issuance of mining permits or revoking permits already issued, despite pressure to do just that by social activists and the CBCP. (Note: In January, the CBCP reiterated its concerns about mining in a public statement, which called for the repeal of the Mining Act, among other items. End Note.)

16. (C) With respect to population policy, Claudio said there was "little chance" that Malacanang would ever endorse HB 3773, a proposed bill in the House that its proponents say would set a comprehensive national policy on responsible parenthood and population management (ref A). Claudio noted that the president had not taken any position on the bill's merits per se. That said, she knew that the bill was "controversial" and had "upset many in the Catholic Church whom the President did not want to offend." She had no plans to block the bill, however, which already had a sizable number of co-signors in the House. In a March 21 discussion with Acting Pol/C, Dr. Bernie Villegas, a vice president and population expert at the Opus Dei-run University of Asia and the Pacific, commented that he had heard there was "an informal understanding" between Malacanang and the Church that the GRP would not push for HB 3773 "under any circumstances."

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Church Reluctant to Intervene  
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17. (C) Arroyo's efforts appear to be bearing fruit. Most contacts agree that the vast majority of bishops are reluctant to be drawn into politics, a stance which effectively helps Arroyo. Coronel commented that this does not mean that bishops "necessarily support her," though many see her as a very pious woman who attends mass every day. Most bishops, however, feel that the Church needs to avoid

getting involved directly in politics, a view in line with the pressures it is under from the Vatican which wants the Church worldwide to stick to spiritual issues (see ref B). Coronel acknowledged that there is a small cluster of bishops (probably five or so out of roughly 90 bishops nationally) who strongly oppose Arroyo, claiming that her administration is corrupt and "anti-poor." One of her main detractors is Archbishop Oscar Cruz, an outspoken cleric with ties to the mainstream Opposition. Many in the Church -- to no avail so far -- want Cruz to stop making pronouncements on politics. Coronel added that Arroyo's relatively solid positioning with the Church could change quickly if new scandals emerged.

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Comment  
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18. (C) Arroyo will no doubt continue to work hard to maintain good links with the Church, given its widespread influence (along with the military, the Church is probably the most important institution in the country). Both Marcos and Estrada got crosswise with the Church which backed successful "People Power" protests against them; Arroyo, however, has been careful to mind the store so that does not happen to her. At this time, her positioning with the Church seems relatively solid, though -- as noted by Coronel -- any further scandals impacting on her or her administration (such as the "Hello Garci" tapes matter which rocked her administration last year) could change the status quo.

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Kenney